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Leo Cherne's Magnificent Obsession

By Dale Van Atta

In a move that later seemed prescient, Leo Cherne, chairman of the International Rescue Committee, assigned volunteers to the Sudan six years ago to serve a stream of Ethiopian refugees. As the number of refugees grew, Cherne committed more resources of the privately funded relief group. Then in October 1984, he gave an impassioned speech about the famine to the IRC executive committee, and fellow committee members immediately upgraded the program.

Seven days later, televised scenes of dying Ethiopian children galvanized Americans into opening their hearts and purses. And in the Sudan's border camps, the IRC helped save tens of thousands of lives.

Helping those in need, people suffering from hunger and tyranny, is what Leo Cherne (pronounced Churn) has been doing for most of his 73 years.

In October 1956, the world just watched and did nothing as Hungarians, armed with bricks and Molotov cocktails, fought Russian tanks. Cherne acted. He boarded a Vienna-bound plane with $200,000 worth of antibiotics donated to the IRC. At the Hungarian border, he stashed the drugs in the back of a car and headed for Budapest.

Maneuvering through rubble-strewn streets, Cherne made his way to the freedom fighters' headquarters with the desperately needed drugs. As Red Army tanks massed for their final offensive, he raced toward the border, two Hungarian teen-agers hidden in his car. To avoid Soviet battalions, he drove across fields and pastures, finally smuggling the youngsters into Austria. He flew to New York and went on television to describe the tragic conditions in Hungary. Within two months, Cherne's IRC raised nearly $2.5 million and assisted thousands of Hungarians who had fled their homeland.

Although little-known to the public, Leo Cherne has, as a humanitarian and adviser to U.S. Presidents, played key roles in the great events of modern history. He is a true Renaissance man, having achieved success as a sculptor, lawyer, songwriter, journalist and economist.

Throughout his varied life, Cherne has had one magnificent obsession: an unswerving devotion to liberty. This has been responsible for lifesaving work in behalf of millions of refugees and changed the policies of U.S. and other governments. In 1984, it won him America's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

To Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D., N.Y.), Cherne has "for more than 40 years been one of the best-kept secrets of American foreign policy. He has an absolutely extraordinary understanding that if you want to get things done in Washington, you let other people take the credit."

Cherne was born in New York City in 1912, the son of Russian refugees. Their love of music influenced Leo, who was recruited for the Metropolitan Opera Children's Chorus. He later composed hundreds of songs, and one, "I'll Never Forget," was a 1941 hit.

Another early occupation was journalism. While in college, he wrote for New York City tabloids, once doing a muckraking exposé of the lethal alcohol being served in Prohibition-era speakeasies. The legal profession lured him next. Cherne passed the bar exam, and in 1935 he answered an ad that read, "Wanted: young attorney capable of writing about Social Security laws."

The employer turned out to be a publication providing legal distillations of various statutes. One of 50 applicants, Cherne was assigned to make a digest of "the Washington unemployment-insurance laws" in five days. He did it in four, only to learn that it was Washington *State* he was supposed to research, not *D.C.*, which he had done. He raced to complete the proper paper in a day—and he was hired.

A year later, Cherne and a partner founded the Research Institute of America to advise corporate clients on economic and regulatory developments. The institute quickly developed a reputation for assessing even the toughest and most controversial issues correctly. This year the institute is celebrating its 50th anniversary, with Cherne as its executive director.

Cherne has been serving Presidents ever since he helped Franklin Roosevelt plan the nation's industrial mobilization for war. Harry Truman assigned him to evaluate the needs of postwar Germany. After Cherne traveled there "undercover" as a journalist, he made far-reaching recommendations to the White House. In part as a result of Cherne's urging, Truman canceled the Morgenthau Plan to turn Germany into an "agrarian society."

Cherne's savvy caught the eye of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who in 1946 was turning feudal Japan into a fledgling democracy. The general summoned Cherne to develop a tax system that would redistribute the wealth of Japan's rich, war-making class—the *zaibatsu*—and create a large middle class so democracy could thrive. The tax reform helped propel the war-ravaged nation into its present position of an economic superpower.

Returning from a trip to Asia in 1954, Cherne fell ill. Doctors diagnosed the illness as acute fatigue. "Whatever you touch," his physician said, "is filled with tension. You must find a relaxing activity."

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